

THE SPIRITUAL ISSUES OF THE WAR

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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN HOLLAND UNDER GERMAN OCCUPATION

In one of a series of addresses by various speakers in St. Paul's Cathedral, the following account was given by Dr. J. A. W. Burger of the developments of the situation in occupied Holland as it has affected the Churches.

Dr. Burger, who is a lawyer from Dordrecht, escaped from Holland to England during the course of last year (1943). In his own country he had for many years belonged to the Labour Party, and he was also a staunch supporter of the Church.

He had been a member of several Church commissions, notably the Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church on questions of Church and Labour. His abilities and knowledge attracted the attention of the Netherlands Government, who have made him a Cabinet Minister without Portfolio while still under the age of forty.

In his address Dr. Burger said:

The history of the Netherlands as a nation begins with the battle for freedom of religion. No wonder the resistance of the Netherlands has a strong spiritual aspect, but that is a problem in itself. The Church is not just part of the resistance movement, but, according to her mission, she in fact develops a strong resistance against Nazi principles.

In a few words I will try to give you an idea of the present situation.

The Government, the local authorities, the Press, the Trade Unions, every organisation and association, in short, everything appearing in public life, is in the hands of the

Quislings, although they are only one per cent. of the population, according to their statistics, which certainly are not under-estimated. The other 99 per cent. have no connection whatsoever with this small group of traitors and avoid any contact with them. As soon as the ordinary man in the street gives expression to his own convictions, he knows that he not only risks his own life but that of his family as well. Arbitrarily, without any statement of reasons, he is taken prisoner; no possibility of contacting the world outside or receiving counsel's advice. The outsider, viewing the situation in Holland, just sees leading Quislings and for the rest a silent nation. On closer examination, however, one notices that this nation is not really silent, but very active in its defence. There are approximately 50 underground papers. Every school, factory and club is a persistent source of sabotage and resistance, whose actions continue with the utmost secrecy. They gained their experience in this underground resistance at the cost of many victims.

The One Voice Which Still Speaks

In this world of boisterous Quislings and embittered silent people, there is only one body that raises her voice, openly and for everybody to hear, and that is the Church. Although it is strictly forbidden to mention the name of any living member of our dynasty (even the streets bearing their names were renamed), the following prayer can be heard every Sunday in all churches in our occupied country: "We pray Thee for all

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those Thou hast placed in authority; Lord, give that above all, the glory of Thy Kingdom and Thy Gospel be understood and honoured by all; especially we pray Thee for our beloved Queen, Her Household and Her Government. Wilt Thou be near Her to comfort and guide Her by Thy holy Spirit. We pray Thee to give Her and Her Government in this great trial, wisdom to do the right, to endure all things for the benefit and well-being of our people. We pray Thee, give those foreign Powers, whom, in Thine unfathomable counsel, Thou hast permitted to rule over our country, that they may obey Thy commandments."

As you will understand, this is not done without losses, but the Church has no choice. Yielding to the enemy would mean her spiritual doom, even though she might prosper materially.

National Socialism, as instituted by the Germans, is a totalitarian doctrine, a complete conception of life based upon principles adverse to our Christian ideas. To compromise is impossible and an offensive and defensive struggle is the only course open. When on the offensive the attitude of the Church is beyond all doubt.

In the early days of the occupation, all Roman Catholic priests received instructions from their bishops to read from the pulpit, without any comment, that believers were not permitted to be members of the National Socialistic movement, of the S.S. and of the W.A. unless forcibly compelled. Even then, it was forbidden to attend any meetings or participate in any propaganda. It was also forbidden to be a member of the Trade-Union Front, the Agricultural Front or any National Socialistic Association. Anyone who did not abide by these instructions would be debarred from the sacraments and consequently excluded from Church marriage or Church burial. These instructions caused a great number of incidents, when the occupying authorities forced their way into church and churchyard. Yet the Church has always adhered to its principles.

A Memorable Circular

From the Protestant Churches I would like to mention only one official statement, i.e., the circular which was read from all the pulpits on Sunday, February 21st, 1943. "Though conscious of its own unworthiness before God, it is the task of the Church—by virtue of the vocation it has received from

Christ—to raise its voice, even in matters of public life, in protest when the principles that have their root in the Gospel are being violated. The Church therefore has repeatedly lodged serious complaints with the occupying power regarding the measures that constitute specific violations of the principles on which the Christian life of our people is based: justice, charity and freedom of conscience. The Church would be neglecting its duty if it failed to impress upon the authorities that they too are subject to Divine Law. For that reason it has drawn the attention of the occupying power to:

the increasing lawlessness; the persecution unto death of Jewish fellow-citizens, the fact that an outlook on life which is a flagrant violation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is forced upon the people, the compulsory labour service as a National Socialist educational institution, the forced labour of Netherland workers in Germany, the killing of hostages, the imprisonment of numerous Dutch subjects including church dignitaries in such conditions that an alarming number have already lost their lives in concentration camps."

"In view of the latest developments the Church now has to raise its voice against the acts of hunting, rounding-up and carrying off thousands of young people.

"On the other hand, the Church also feels bound to issue an emphatic warning against hatred and feelings of revenge in the hearts of our people and expressions thereof. According to the Word of God no one may take the law into his own hands.

"It is also the Church's duty to preach the Word of God which says: 'God must be obeyed above men.' This Word is a guide in all conflicts of the conscience, including those created by the measures which are now being taken. And it forbids co-operation in unjust deeds. Co-operation renders the participant an accomplice in injustice.

"The Churches desire once more to bring these matters to the notice of the Reichskommissar. They pray God that the occupying power as well as our people may find the way of justice and obedience to His Word."

Direct Challenge to Seyss-Inquart

Further, I would like to draw your special attention to the direct tone of the following letter, dated June 9th, 1943, sent by the

Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches together to Reichskommissar Seyss-Inquart: "After many previous events during the occupation years which have forced the Netherland Churches to complain to your Excellency, notably with regard to the question of our Jewish citizens, something so terrible is now taking place, that we cannot desist from addressing these words in the name of Our Lord, to your Excellency. We have already complained about several acts on the part of the occupying power. These acts clash with the spiritual principles of our people, who ever since their birth (as a nation) have at least attempted, together with their Government, to live in accordance with God's Word. A beginning has now been made with the sterilisation of so-called mixed marriages. But God, Who created Heaven and Earth and Whose Commandments apply to all men and to Whom your Excellency, too, must give account one day, told men: 'Be fruitful and multiply.' Sterilisation means physical and spiritual mutilation directly at variance with the Divine Commandment that we shall not dishonour, hate, wound or kill our neighbours. Sterilisation means the violation of the Divine Commandment as well as human rights. It is the last consequence of the anti-Christian racial doctrine which destroys nations, and of self-exaltation without bounds. It represents a view of the world and of life that undermines all real Christian existence, making it ultimately impossible.

"Your Excellency is for the moment the highest *de facto* political authority in the Netherlands. As things are, you are entrusted with the maintenance of order and law in the country. You are entrusted with this, not only by the Führer of the German Reich, but also through the inscrutable dispensation of God, Whom the Christian Church proclaims on earth. To you apply, exactly as to all other men, and to you especially because you happen to be placed in this high office, the Commandments of this Lord and Judge of the entire earth.

"Therefore the Christian Churches of the Netherlands, ordered by God and in accordance with His Word, say to your Excellency: It is your Excellency's duty to stop the shameful practice of sterilisation. We have no illusions. We are well aware that we can hardly expect your Excellency to heed the voice of the Church, that is, the voice of the Gospel, that is, the voice of God. But what we cannot hope for as a human achievement, we dare hope for in our Faith in Christ. The

living God has power to convert and to change your Excellency's heart. For that, too, we pray God for the good of your Excellency and our suffering people."

Both letters are very much to the point and it is a noticeable fact that the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Churches work together.

When the occupying authorities decided that the amount of all collections should go to the National Socialist Winter Aid Fund, the Churches just discontinued them, a measure by which they did not suffer, since the voluntary gifts literally poured in.

Not Moved by Threats

It has happened several times that I received a warning from loyal Dutch officials that a certain minister was on the verge of being arrested, and that it would be wiser for him to be less outspoken. Never have I noticed that the minister in question paid attention to such a warning. On the contrary! I remember once during a meeting of a sub-committee of the Synod of Protestant Churches that a well-known minister entered quite unexpectedly, who, we all knew, was in hiding after having been imprisoned for quite a long while. Delighted to see him, we inquired how matters stood, whereupon he answered, "Not too good, because the Church is not sufficiently active." Having been asked what he meant, he remarked, "Insufficient action has been taken against National Socialism during the last months, otherwise more ministers would have been imprisoned."

This inspired us to work very hard and make the most of the so-called "Church-week for everybody." During that week in each district voluntary organisations canvassed the houses, requesting the people to come to church at a fixed time, whether they had any religious conviction or not. As a result of this drive during that particular week there was a greater attendance at the churches than ever before in the Church's history. Amongst those present was a vast number who had never attended church in their lives.

As subject of the sermon was chosen "Who is the King of the World?" and large posters throughout the Netherlands announced it.

Need I tell you that the Quislings had also been active? Underneath the words "Who is the King of the World?" they stuck large labels with their answer "Adolf Hitler."

I do not intend to draw your attention exclusively to the active resistance of the

Church, but I do wish to emphasise that the Church has ministered to her congregations as never before.

For the living of many of our people is threatened. Instructions from the Royal Netherlands Government in London induced quite a number of civil servants to take risks in the struggle against the enemy; the constant worrying problem of how to get clothing and food; the cruel fate of Jewish fellow-citizens rounded up and carried off to Germany and Poland; hundreds of thousands of workers dragged to Germany! Under all these depressing circumstances, where the noise of Nazi propaganda alone is heard, it is up to the Church to give the sorely needed consolation. Moreover, in a way similar to 2,000 years ago in Palestine, the faithful hear themselves called "the salt of the earth." At that time, too, this statement must have sounded queer to the small powerless group to whom it was addressed, just as it is the case in the Dutch churches with no other weapon but their faith in their message.

There *must* be a hope for the future, however, and experiencing the National Socialist practice day by day, it is evident that such a hope cannot be realised by power but only by Christianity. So this powerless group, with all its difficulties, *must* indeed be "the salt of the earth." From whom else could redemption be anticipated? It is our vocation, the Churches proclaimed to the Reichskommissar in 1941, to penetrate the lives of the people and to realise spiritual values.

The Real Danger

Yet, however uplifting and impressive the picture of the fighting Church is, the danger of nationalism creeping into the assertions of some of her ministers should not be overlooked.

For instance, one Sunday morning (it was November 8th, 1942) I was startled by a low ringing at the front door. As I had chosen this quiet Sunday morning to do some odd jobs and did not like to be taken by surprise, I cautiously went to see who had called. I saw a man whom I knew to be living in the same street, excitedly dancing and beckoning me to open the door. As soon as he had entered, he told me with glowing face that the Allies had landed in Africa. When express-

ing doubt, he assured me that it was true because the pastor had just told the people in the church!

However pleasing to the ear this story may be, it just shows that threatening nationalism I have just mentioned.

It cannot be denied that the spiritual mission of the Church and the national interest of the occupied territories often run on parallel lines. I cannot help thinking of the danger which arises here for the Church. For the fact that she means so tremendously much to the people in the occupied Netherlands is not due to her resistance to Germany, nor to her national interest, but because she provides the spiritual answer to the needs of our people. As Christ did, this Church puts before our people the great principles that enlighten them in their dark hour.

This is fully realised in the Netherlands and it explains why so much interest is shown in the sermons of German bishops, copies of which are being smuggled into the country. A few German bishops are convinced of this true vocation of the Church, even when in opposition with their own national interest.

As early as September 1941, the Church in the Netherlands felt it as a necessity to give her official indications in these words: "During these days the danger is particularly imminent, lest we raise our own national feeling so high as to make it a false God at the expense of the Christian faith. We are especially inclined to give way to natural feelings of hatred and enmity instead of being simply true witnesses of Christ."

That the Church in the present national need dares to express these views officially, merely accentuates her true value. In this loyalty to her vocation—even when adverse to our national feeling—lies the surest guarantee that after the War the Church will find her way and fulfil her mission.

More than ever before, Church life in the Netherlands is in the public eye. However many human imperfections may be attached to the Church, her significance is enormous. We are filled with gratitude for the rich blessings the Church daily bestows upon our deeply bereaved people. In the hard everyday life in the occupied Netherlands the Church is to them the visible proof of God's unending mercy.